

## CHAPTER III

### MR. FRANK MULLER

John Niel woke early the next morning, feeling as sore and stiff as though he had been well beaten and then wrapped up tight in horse-girths. He made shift, however, to dress himself, and then, with the help of a stick, limped through the French windows that opened from his room on to the verandah, and surveyed the scene before him. It was a delightful spot. At the back of the stead was the steep boulder-strewn face of the flat-topped hill that curved round on each side, embosoming a great slope of green, in the lap of which the house was placed. It was very solidly built of brown stone, and, with the exception of the waggon-shed and other outbuildings which were roofed with galvanised iron, that shone and glistened in the rays of the morning sun in a way that would have made an eagle blink, was covered with rich brown thatch. All along its front ran a wide verandah, up the trellis-work of which green vines and blooming creepers trailed pleasantly, and beyond was the broad carriage-drive of red soil, bordered with bushy orange-trees laden with odorous flowers and green and golden fruit. On the farther side of the orange-trees were the gardens, fenced in with low walls of rough stone, and the orchard planted with standard fruit-trees, and beyond these again the oxen and ostrich kraals, the latter full of long-necked birds. To the right of the house grew thriving plantations of blue-gum and black wattle, and to the left was a broad stretch of cultivated lands, lying so that they could be irrigated for winter crops by means

of water led from the great spring that gushed out of the mountain-side high above the house, and gave its name of Mooifontein to the place.

All these and many more things John Niel saw as he looked out from the verandah at Mooifontein, but for the moment at any rate they were lost in the wild and wonderful beauty of the panorama that rolled away for miles and miles at his feet, till it was bounded by the mighty range of the Drakensberg to the left, tipped here and there with snow, and by the dim and vast horizon of the swelling Transvaal plains to the right and far in front of him. It was a beautiful sight, and one to make the blood run in a man's veins, and his heart beat happily because he was alive to see it. Mile upon mile of grass-clothed veldt beneath, bending and rippling like a corn-field in the quick breath of the morning, space upon space of deep-blue sky overhead with ne'er a cloud to dim it, and the swift rush of the wind between. Then to the left there, impressive to look on and conducive to solemn thoughts, the mountains rear their crests against the sky, and, crowned with the gathered snows of the centuries whose monuments they are, from aeon to aeon gaze majestically out over the wide plains and the ephemeral ant-like races who tread them, and while they endure think themselves the masters of their little world. And over all--mountain, plain, and flashing stream--the glorious light of the African sun and the Spirit of Life moving now as it once moved upon the darkling waters.

John stood and gazed at the untamed beauty of the scene, in his mind comparing it to many cultivated prospects which he had known, and coming

to the conclusion that, however desirable the presence of civilised man might be in the world, it could not be said that his operations really add to its beauty. For the old line, "Nature unadorned adorned the most," still remains true in more senses than one.

Presently his reflections were interrupted by the step of Silas Croft, which, notwithstanding his age and bent frame, still rang firm enough--and he turned to greet him.

"Well, Captain Niel," said the old man, "up already! It looks well if you mean to take to farming. Yes, it's a pretty view, and a pretty place too. Well, I made it. Twenty-five years ago I rode up here and saw this spot. Look, you see that rock there behind the house? I slept under it and woke at sunrise and looked out at this beautiful scene and at the great veldt (it was all alive with game then), and I said to myself, 'Silas, for five-and-twenty years have you wandered about this great country, and now you are getting tired of it; you've never seen a fairer spot than this or a healthier; be a wise man and stop here.' And so I did. I bought the 3,000 morgen (6,000 acres), more or less, for 10 pounds down and a case of gin, and I set to work to make this place, and you see I have made it. Ay, it has grown under my hand, every stone and tree of it, and you know what that means in a new country. But one way or another I have done it, and now I have grown too old to manage it, and that's how I came to give out that I wanted a partner, as Mr. Snow told you down in Durban. You see, I told Snow it must be a gentleman; I don't care much about the money, I'll take a thousand for a third share

if I can get a gentleman--none of your Boers or mean whites for me. I tell you I have had enough of Boers and their ways; the best day of my life was when old Shepstone ran up the Union Jack there in Pretoria and I could call myself an Englishman once more. Lord! and to think that there are men who are subjects of the Queen and want to be subjects of a Republic again--Mad! Captain Niel, I tell you, quite mad! However, there's an end of it all now. You know what Sir Garnet Wolseley told them in the name of the Queen up at the Vaal River, that this country would remain English until the sun stood still in the heavens and the waters of the Vaal ran backwards.[\*] That's good enough for me, for, as I tell these grumbling fellows who want the land back now that we have paid their debts and defeated their enemies, no English government is false to its word, or breaks engagements solemnly entered into by its representatives. We leave that sort of thing to foreigners. No, no, Captain Niel, I would not ask you to take a share in this place if I wasn't sure that it would remain under the British flag. But we will talk of all this another time, and now come in to breakfast."

[\*] A fact.--Author.

After breakfast, as John was far too lame to walk about the farm, the fair Bessie suggested that he should come and help her to wash a batch of ostrich feathers, and, accordingly, off he went. The locus operandi was in a space of lawn at the rear of a little clump of naatche orange-trees, of which the fruit is like that of the Maltese orange, only larger. Here were placed an ordinary washing-tub half-filled with

warm water, and a tin bath full of cold. The ostrich feathers, many of which were completely coated with red dirt, were plunged first into the tub of warm water, where John Niel scrubbed them with soap, and then transferred to the tin bath, where Bessie rinsed them and laid them on a sheet in the sun to dry. The morning was very pleasant, and John soon came to the conclusion that there are many more disagreeable occupations in the world than the washing of ostrich feathers with a lovely girl to help you. For there was no doubt but that Bessie was lovely, looking a very type of happy, healthy womanhood as she sat opposite to him on the little stool, her sleeves rolled up almost to the shoulder, showing a pair of arms that would not have disgraced a statue of Venus, and laughed and chatted away as she washed the feathers. Now, John Niel was not a susceptible man: he had gone through the fire years before and burnt his fingers like many another confiding youngster but, all the same, he did wonder as he knelt there and watched this fair girl, who somehow reminded him of a rich rosebud bursting into bloom, how long it would be possible to live in the same house with her without falling under the spell of her charm and beauty. Then he began to think of Jess, and of what a strange contrast the two were.

"Where is your sister?" he asked presently.

"Jess? Oh, I think that she has gone to the Lion Kloof, reading or sketching, I don't know which. You see in this establishment I represent labour and Jess represents intellect," and she nodded her head prettily at him, and added, "There is a mistake somewhere, she got all the

brains."

"Ah," said John quietly, and looking up at her, "I don't think that you are entitled to complain of the way in which Nature has treated you."

She blushed a little, more at the tone of his voice than the words, and went on hastily, "Jess is the dearest, best, and cleverest woman in the whole world--there. I believe that she has only one fault, and it is that she thinks too much about me. Uncle said that he had told you how we came here first when I was eight years old. Well, I remember that when we lost our way on the veldt that night, and it rained so and was so cold, Jess took off her own shawl and wrapped it round me over my own. Well, it has been just like that with her always. I am always to have the shawl--everything is to give way to me. But there, that is Jess all over; she is very cold, cold as a stone I sometimes think, but when she does care for anybody it is enough to frighten one. I don't know a great number of women, but somehow I do not think that there can be many in the world like Jess. She is too good for this place; she ought to go away to England and write books and become a famous woman, only----" she added reflectively, "I am afraid that Jess's books would all be sad ones."

Just then Bessie stopped talking and suddenly changed colour, the bunch of lank wet feathers she held in her hand dropping from it with a little splash back into the bath. Following her glance, John looked down the avenue of blue-gum trees and perceived a big man with a broad hat and

mounted on a splendid black horse, cantering leisurely towards the house.

"Who is that, Miss Croft?" he asked.

"It is a man I don't like," she said with a little stamp of her foot.

"His name is Frank Muller, and he is half a Boer and half an Englishman. He is very rich, and very clever, and owns all the land round this place, so uncle has to be civil to him, though he does not like him either. I wonder what he wants now."

On came the horse, and John thought that its rider was going to pass without seeing them, when suddenly the movement of Bessie's dress between the naatche trees caught his eye, and he pulled up and looked round. He was a large and exceedingly handsome man, apparently about forty years old, with clear-cut features, cold, light-blue eyes, and a remarkable golden beard that hung down over his chest. For a Boer he was rather smartly dressed in English-made tweed clothes, and tall riding-boots.

"Ah, Miss Bessie," he called out in English, "there you are, with your pretty arms all bare. I'm in luck to be just in time to see them. Shall I come and help you to wash the feathers? Only say the word, now----"

Just then he caught sight of John Niel, checked himself, and added:

"I have come to look for a black ox, branded with a heart and a 'W' inside of the heart. Do you know if your uncle has seen it on the place anywhere?"

"No, Meinheer Muller," replied Bessie, coldly, "but he is down there," pointing at a kraal on the plain some half-mile away, "if you want to go and ask about it."

"Mr. Muller," said he, by way of correction, and with a curious contraction of the brow. "'Meinheer' is very well for the Boers, but we are all Englishmen now. Well, the ox can wait. With your permission, I'll stop here till Oom Croft (Uncle Croft) comes back," and, without further ado, he jumped off his horse and, slipping the reins over its head as an indication to it to stand still, advanced towards Bessie with an outstretched hand. As he came the young lady plunged both her arms up to the elbow in the bath, and it struck John, who was observing the scene closely, that she did this in order to avoid the necessity of shaking hands with her stalwart visitor.

"Sorry my hands are wet," she said, giving him a cold little nod. "Let me introduce you, Mr. (with emphasis) Frank Muller--Captain Niel--who has come to help my uncle with the place."

John stretched out his hand and Muller shook it.

"Captain," he said interrogatively--"a ship captain, I suppose?"



"No," said John, "a Captain of the English Army."

"Oh, a rooibaatje (red jacket). Well, I don't wonder at your taking to farming after the Zulu war."

"I don't quite understand you," said John, rather coldly.

"Oh, no offence, Captain, no offence. I only meant that you rooibaatjes did not come very well out of that war. I was there with Piet Uys, and it was a sight, I can tell you. A Zulu had only to show himself at night and one would see your regiments skreck (stampede) like a span of oxen when they wind a lion. And then they'd fire--ah, they did fire--anyhow, anywhere, but mostly at the clouds, there was no stopping them; and so, you see, I thought that you would like to turn your sword into a ploughshare, as the Bible says--but no offence, I'm sure--no offence."

All this while John Niel, being English to his backbone, and cherishing the reputation of his profession almost as dearly as his own honour, was boiling with inward wrath, which was all the fiercer because he knew there was some truth in the Boer's insults. He had the sense, however, to keep his temper--outwardly, at any rate.

"I was not in the Zulu war, Mr. Muller," he said, and just then old Silas Croft rode up, and the conversation dropped.

Mr. Frank Muller stopped to dinner and far on into the afternoon, for his lost ox seemed to have entirely slipped his memory. There he sat close to the fair Bessie, smoking and drinking gin-water, and talking with great volubility in English sprinkled with Boer-Dutch terms that John Niel did not understand, and gazing at the young lady in a manner which John somehow found unpleasant. Of course it was no affair of his, and he had no interest in the matter, but for all that he thought this remarkable-looking Dutchman exceedingly disagreeable. At last, indeed, he could bear it no longer, and hobbled out for a little walk with Jess, who, in her abrupt way, offered to show him the garden.

"You don't like that man?" she said to him, as they went slowly down the slope in front of the house.

"No; do you?"

"I think," replied Jess quietly, but with much emphasis, "that he is the most odious man I ever saw--and the most curious." Then she relapsed into silence, only broken now and again by an occasional remark about the flowers and trees.

Half an hour afterwards, when they arrived again at the top of the slope, Mr. Muller was just riding off down the avenue of blue gums. By the verandah stood a Hottentot named Jantje, who had been holding the Dutchman's horse. He was a curious, wizened-up little fellow, dressed

in rags, and with hair like the worn tags of a black woollen carpet. His age might have been anything between twenty-five and sixty; it was impossible to form any opinion on the point. Just now, however, his yellow monkey face was convulsed with an expression of intense malignity, and he was standing there in the sunshine cursing rapidly beneath his breath in Dutch, and shaking his fist after the form of the retreating Boer--a very epitome of impotent but overmastering passion.

"What is he doing?" asked John.

Jess laughed, and answered, "Jantje does not like Frank Muller any more than I do, but I don't know why. He will never tell me."